

Hurricane Katrina: Managing the Crisis and Evacuating New Orleans Draft
Senator Joe Lieberman
February 1, 2006

Madam Chairman, today we begin our 14th hearing on Hurricane Katrina, as we try to finish our investigation and report to the American people on the lessons learned from Katrina and the reforms needed before the next hurricane season begins in June.

Today's hearing – “Hurricane Katrina: Managing the Crisis and Evacuating New Orleans” – is a crucial part of this investigation.

We will hear today from witnesses from all levels of government who will describe what was done and not done for the tens of thousands of people who were still in New Orleans after the hurricane hit.

It's a terrible story.

Before we hear from those directly involved in the post-storm evacuation efforts, we will hear from New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin.

In some ways, what we will hear from the Mayor today will cause us to wonder: “What might have been.”

What might have been if the Mayor's earlier plans for getting the city ready for a disaster had been acted upon.

The Mayor was elected in 2002 and almost immediately began urging federal officials to help New Orleans prepare for a catastrophic hurricane. He asked for help in improving the levee system everyone knew would fail in a catastrophic hurricane; help creating mass-evacuation plans to get those residents without transportation out of harm's way; and help for a faulty communications system.

He began this quest a full two years before the 2004 Hurricane Pam exercise so accurately predicted what would happen if a killer storm hit New Orleans.

Today, we will seek to learn more about what the Mayor did or did not do to prepare his city for Katrina and catastrophic storms like it.

In some cases, work was under way and time just ran out. But, in other cases, good ideas and farsighted plans were never acted upon.

For instance, as we heard yesterday, New Orleans city officials had begun to devise their own transportation plan for a mass evacuation so as few people would be left behind as possible.

Agreements were being negotiated for almost a year with Amtrak, the Regional Transit Authority (RTA), the school board, and the Delta Queen riverboat company but were not completed when Katrina made landfall.

Given the Mayor's long-standing belief that an evacuation plan was needed – knowledge that predated the Hurricane Pam exercise – why weren't they finished.

We have heard that New Orleans' budget for emergency preparedness was smaller than some of its neighboring parishes and we will want to know if this is true and why. We will also want to know why the city's lead search-and-rescue agency, the New Orleans Fire Department, had no boats – and the police department just seven.

Is it true that neighboring parishes' had fully-stocked emergency operations centers (EOC) that occupied entire buildings, while the New Orleans EOC occupied just two offices on one floor of City Hall with little equipment pre-positioned there.

Mayor Nagin never left his post during Katrina. But the help itself seems inadequate to the task. Mayor was left without his office, communications, transportation,

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which made it impossible for him to coordinate with emergency officials and direct the response, relief and operations. Couldn't that have been avoided?

Madam Chairman, these are just some of the questions that must be asked today of the Mayor if we are going to fully understand what went wrong during the run up to and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

The second panel today will address the post-landfall evacuation. The story the witnesses will tell is a continuation of the one we heard yesterday, where little to nothing was done to help those people who lacked transportation to leave New Orleans, in part because arrangement had not been made to pre-stage busses.

A hurricane is a catastrophe that provides leaders and emergency responders with ample warning it is on the way. But while the saga of Katrina is sprinkled with individual acts of initiative and bravery, overall our governments' responses were poor and disjointed, despite the days of warning that Katrina was coming and the years of warning of what would happen when "the big one" finally hit.

The only tragedy greater than what happened to New Orleans would be to learn nothing and watch it all happen again when the next disaster hits.

Hurricane season is now just four months away. Nature takes no sabbaticals. And time is not our friend. We must investigate, educate, and reform with a sense of urgency missing in the years, months, and days before Katrina.

Thank you Madam Chairman.